

siblings, we would sneak into the bus depot and crawl under one of the stalls to use the bathroom.

Around that time I began to question the prevalent stereotypes of “Indian” people. I had heard “Indians” associated with the characteristics of being lazy, dirty, drunk, and dumb. I realized that the residential school program was designed to instill a particular work ethic. “Idle souls are the devil’s workshop,” I was told. Another objective of the residential school regime was cleanliness. As children, we cleaned the school from morning to bedtime. Chores were done intermittently throughout the day. The stereotypes that I heard about seemed to contradict my own experiences as a pupil. Also, both my parents worked extremely hard. In the springtime, I would not see my father for days, as he would be up early seeding his farm to return hours after I had retired. However, as I grew older, I began to see evidence that supported the stereotypes of the dominant society. I began to look for ways to understand these seemingly contradictory pieces. Why is the poverty among Indians so great? What is it that makes us Natives? Why are we so different from the non-Natives? I entered university with these questions.

This book is the result of my attempts to find answers to these questions. My search led me to a profound personal and academic inquiry into traditional *Siksikaitstapi* ways of knowing. I came to realize that to know only within Eurocentred forms of education amounted to the annihilation of the traditional knowledge and the sacred science of Indigenous people. My biography is a good example of how this happens.

## 5. Traditional Knowledge in Academe

Needless to say, the education I received did not answer my questions about poverty and difference. There certainly was no adequate answer to the question of what makes us Natives who we are. My questions only intensified after surviving the frustrations of obtaining my initial degree. I had received three scholarships during the four-year program and

made history among my own tribe by being the first *Pikanaki* or for that matter *Pikannikowan* to complete a university degree. Nonetheless, the experience was disappointing because my own expectations of gaining some understanding of the conditions in which First Nations people live was not fulfilled. I was left with the need to acquire more knowledge, thinking that perhaps then I would gain deeper understanding of the causes for the condition in which others and I lived. By this time I had realized that the knowledge I had acquired was irrelevant for the questions I was trying to answer. I had wanted to apply the knowledge and understanding that I gained from university to my own community and the contradictions I was observing; however, this was not possible.

I realized that the research skills I had acquired were not appropriate for the investigation of issues of central importance to Indigenous peoples. In the fall of 1976, after my graduation, I took a ten-day alcohol counsellor training program at the Nechi Institute of Alcohol and Drug Education in Alberta. The course was based on experiential learning of the cultural philosophies and traditions of Indigenous peoples. I found the experience to be totally engaging. The commitment of the trainers was inspiring and enlightening. The trainees shared their pain, anger, fear, humor, and spirituality. Since early childhood this was my first experience of authenticity, humility, and honesty in a tribal community. I began to feel human again. It connected me to my own feelings and emotions, to my love for people, and to the strength of my own connections with *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*, the sacred powers of mystery. These experiences created in me an awareness of the dissociated self within myself. Kremer (1994, 61), who introduced the concept of “dissociative schismogenesis,” describes the disease process for an Indigenous person as the knowing of the Eurocentric perspective:

This process is the abstract core of the empiricist and rationalist worldview which is an attempt to align the world to *man's* will (needless to say, an imperialistic endeavor on all counts). The consciousness process of the modern mind is thus labeled as an escalating process which ... will lead to intolerable stress and



eventual breakdown.... Dissociative schismogenesis is the stilling and killing of those aspects of being human which are needed to be whole or in balance. Dissociative schismogenesis is the increasing unconsciousness of our participation in the phenomena.

Looking back, I see how I moved further and further away from my tribal connections as I continued further and further in my formal education. Fortunately I had experienced family connections during my childhood on which I was able to draw as I began a profound search for my identity. By returning to *Siksikaitapitapi* ways of knowing, I began to understand how to apply the knowledge that I had acquired during my formal education and my life experiences to pressing issues such as the dismal failure of Native children in the Eurocentred educational system.

At that time I began to work with Dr. Pamela (Apela) Colorado, who had coined the term “Indigenous science.” She describes it as

... a state of balance which is at the heart of the universe and the spirit of the science.... The greatest power of Native science lies in the reasons behind the tree's existence.... (1988, 36–38)

This is one of the terms that can be used to describe my journey of connecting with and participating in my tribal responsibilities through the integrity of tribal ceremonies and traditions. Indigenous science refers to the intimate knowledge of *Siksikaitapitapi* alliances that are central for my recovery.

Research, understood as an inquiry using traditional protocols, is a journey of relating, participating, and understanding my relatives. This text cannot possibly capture this journey in its entirety, nor can it capture the spirits and ancestors who guided these processes, nor does it capture the depth of understanding that I have gained within my own tribal alliances. However, the objective of this book is to identify the pertinent concepts that have guided me on this journey and to present them as a model for tribal people who are aware of their colonization and have the

desire to reconstruct their tribal responsibilities. I present a model of healing premised on recovering one's tribal identity through recovering and reclaiming tribal responsibilities. It is my experience that I present as a way of healing from the effects of colonization. The book maps my own process of coming to know. I hope this will support and assist students and teachers who struggle with similar issues on their own path of coming to know.

The process of decolonization entails remembrance, specifically remembering the teachings of *Kaaahsinnooniksi*, the ways of the ancestors and the ancients. I remembered how my early childhood experiences had connected me to the ways of *Siksikaitsitapi*. But then powerful memories of residential school surfaced. The loss of relationships and the loss of experiences of tribal ways of life became painfully present. In the mirror of my memories I recognized colonial thought, colonial behaviour, and the normative order of colonization. However, these painful memories simultaneously identified lost knowledge that can now be recovered. I can reconstruct the missing pieces for myself personally, and we can do it within an educational system of a different making. The intent of decolonization is an essential prerequisite for the engagement with tribal alliances.

This process is not only painful, but also joyful and full of promise and peace. Remembering is an obligatory ingredient for the completion of the past in a manner that is respectful and honours the losses as we honour the strength of the ancestors and acknowledge their gifts to our present generation. Remembering means drawing on the strengths of my own past from which I can carve a future. It is the past that carries us into the future and contributes to the journey of the present. As human beings, we *Siksikaitsitapi* see ourselves as cosmic, because we are interconnected, related to all of time and to all that there is. As a result, I continue to experience this miracle of our way of life and the gifts and blessings of *Akaitapiwa* ["the old days people," my ancestors].

The awareness of my own "dis-ease process and dissociation created an experience that was transformative for me. I realized that the four years of university had sharpened my skills in analysis and rational thought. Now I



also became aware of my own feelings and began a journey of connecting with the natural world. However, I had yet to realize that my connections with *No'tak* [Spirit] had been awakened. While in the Nechi program, I became more passionate about relationships, an awareness that was both liberating and exhilarating. I felt this experience was changing my life. It helped me to nurture a new awareness and a different way of being.

Coming home begins with the self. Here we begin to connect with *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa* [lit. "(that) which causes or allows us to be living"; Source of Life] and develop an understanding of *Ihtsipaitapiiyopi* [how we live through the Source of Life]. Coming home means coming to know the ancestors who are part of the alliances of the natural world. It is through these alliances that we *Siksikaitsitapi*, like all *Niitsitapi*, are connecting to a collective consciousness that is also our access to *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa* – the Source of Life. *Niitsitapi* humanity emerges from this source and determines our ways of knowing. Knowledge and truths flourish through our relationships and our connections with the natural world.

These connections with *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa* and the alliances of the natural world are contextualized in our human experiences that make up a cosmic self woven into tribal relationships. The purpose and meaning of life arises as this self experiences an interconnected world in which every aspect has the potential of giving meaning to life. All that occurs is understood as sacred, meaning all of life is honoured. The honouring occurs through the conscious connection with the natural alliances in a cosmic world. There is no separation between sacred and secular as in the Christian or Eurocentred sense.

I experienced these alliances for the first time in my life when I began to participate in ceremonies. In 1987, as a part of my Indigenous research project, I went to *Aako'ka'tssin*, the Sundance encampment. Beforehand, I had asked my cousin, who was a member of *Iitsskinneyiiks* [Horn Society] for instruction. However, there was no way that I could have been prepared for the experience that I had at *Aako'ka'tssin*. The bundle spoke to me clearly and with much love. This was love I had never experienced in life. There was no uncertainty in the message that